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Evolution, Idealism, and Individualism in May Kendall's Comic Verse

May Kendall's "Lay of the Trilobite" stages a dialogue between the poem's human speaker and a reanimated fossil. In the course of demolishing the human's self-satisfied belief in the evolutionary superiority of his "mighty mind," the trilobite pokes fun at his reading habits:

"You've Kant to make your brains go round,
 Hegel you have to clear them,
 You've Mr. Browning to confound,
 And Mr. Punch to cheer them!"¹

The "Lay of the Trilobite" is Kendall's most frequently discussed poem, and readings of it typically focus on its critique of the human's complacently anthropocentric interpretation of Darwinian evolution.² My argument in this article, however, is that the tendency to focus on Darwinism in isolation has obscured the breadth of Kendall's interests, and, specifically, that the passing reference to Kant and Hegel in this poem is an example of her sustained consideration of one of the most prominent intellectual trends in late-Victorian Britain: the revival of idealist philosophy. I propose to show that Kendall's comic verse encapsulates and interrogates the connections between several important aspects of late-Victorian culture. Her thinking about idealism informs and is informed by her views on Darwinism, and both in turn constitute parts of the ethical foundation of her belief in social reform.

Hegel is absent from the text of "The Lay of the Trilobite" printed in *Punch* magazine in January 1885: "'You've KANT to make your brains go round, / And CARPENTER to clear them.'"³ It is easy to see, in this version of the poem, a straightforward opposition between the dizzying abstractions of Kant's philosophy and the scientific exactitude of the work of

physiological psychologist William Benjamin Carpenter: as an alternative to the abstruse speculations of German idealism, Carpenter's psychology helps to clear readers' brains through its argument for an empirically verifiable connection between mind and brain. Kendall's decision to revise the poem in her volume *Dreams to Sell* (published in late 1887) was probably motivated, in part, by Carpenter's death in November 1885. But I want to suggest that it was also informed by the prevailing Hegelianism of British idealist philosophy; in April 1887 Kendall registered as a student at the home of British idealism, the University of Oxford. If she had just been looking for a name to replace Carpenter's, she could have used that of any number of contemporary psychologists or physiologists. Hegel's name radically alters the terms of the trilobite's satire, and it also disrupts the otherwise regular meter of Kendall's stanza. There is a deliberate purpose behind this revision to the poem: it implies that Hegel, in an entirely different way from Carpenter, provides a corrective to Kant, and the origins of this claim can be traced to the arguments of the British idealists.

Kendall's education has not yet been examined in detail by critics, but a consideration of her Oxford studies can assist in the development of a more nuanced understanding of her work, and particularly of her writing about evolution and idealism.⁴ She was the daughter of a Wesleyan minister who was stationed to a new town or city every three years.⁵ In the 1880s, when she was in her 20s, the family resided in Liverpool; she attended lectures at Liverpool University College and published poems in *The Liverpool University College Magazine*. When she registered as a student at Somerville Hall, Oxford, one of her referees was A. C. Bradley, who taught literature and history at Liverpool. Kendall's entry in the Somerville register states that during her studies, which ended in June 1889, she "attended Professor Wallace's lectures on moral philosophy." She also explored a range of subjects in tutorials: arithmetic in 1887; Shakespeare and Middle English in 1889; and, in 1888, ethics with David George Ritchie. Kendall was in receipt of a "scholarship of £100 a year collected for her" by

“friends at Liverpool who wished her not to work for exams” towards a particular certificate or diploma.⁶ This financial support enabled her to pursue an independent course of studies, and her decision to work with Ritchie, and to attend the lectures of William Wallace, demonstrates that philosophy was one of her primary interests.

Wallace and Ritchie were two of the most vocal proponents of the idealism that emerged as the predominant philosophy in Oxford and in Britain more widely during the second half of the nineteenth century. Like Bradley, they had been taught by T. H. Green, the leading figure in British idealism, at Balliol College in the 1860s and 70s. Somerville Hall, one of the first two educational institutions for women established within the University of Oxford, had close links to idealism from its foundation in 1879. Pauline Adams notes in her history of Somerville that Bradley lectured on English literature to the hall’s students before he moved to Liverpool in 1881, and that Green’s philosophy exerted a “pervasive moral influence on Somerville’s development.”⁷ As Daniel Brown has shown, Green developed his idealism partly in an effort to counter the atheist and positivist views that had become more acceptable in Britain as a result of the growing authority of the natural sciences.⁸ However, British idealism was not unequivocally hostile to science itself; both Wallace and Ritchie argued for the possibility and utility of an intellectual synthesis with science, especially Darwinism. This aspect of idealist philosophy was of particular interest to Kendall, and her responses to idealism in her comic verse are comparable to her assessments of evolution: she celebrates what she sees as the emphasis in both on progressive change, but she is also critical of the way in which this progressivism can sanction dogmatic assumptions about the teleological inevitability of particular trends and beliefs.

The reports on Kendall’s work written by her Oxford tutors are, for the most part, succinct: her work on Shakespeare is “first class;” in Middle English she is “good. Takes trouble and interest;” and she “would probably pass” an examination in arithmetic, although

there is “greater neatness and clearness of statement wanted, and some practice in decimals.”

Ritchie’s report on Kendall’s tutorials in ethics is a little more detailed, and it highlights their discussion of an issue that is central both to British idealism and to Kendall’s writing:

“Would be a mistake to give up time to preparing for an examination. Much originality.

Especially striking on ‘asceticism’ and ‘the good and evil of individualism.’”⁹ The question

of individualism separated British idealists into two camps: the “absolute idealists” such as

Ritchie and Wallace who, as Sandra den Otter puts it, “maintained that the relativity of

experience concealed an underlying universal reality,” and the “personal idealists” who

“regarded absolute idealism as too other-worldly” and who instead based their ontology on

the individual mind.¹⁰ For Ritchie especially, the philosophy of absolute idealism entailed a

rejection of individualism, a collectivist view of ethics, and, in politics, a commitment to

socialism. Hegel and Kant were often identified as the respective guiding lights of absolute

and personal idealism, and at the turn of the century British writers started to use the phrase

“Kantian individualism” to refer to the latter.¹¹ “The good and evil of individualism” is a

subject examined from both sides throughout Kendall’s poetry, and one way of interpreting

the reference to Kant and Hegel in the “Lay of the Trilobite” is to identify the human as a

Kantian individualist, whose self-absorbed anthropocentrism might be corrected through a

recognition of the absolute perspective championed by Hegel and his British adherents.

As I will go on to demonstrate, the group of poems titled “Science” in *Dreams to Sell* represents Kendall’s most sustained examination of the relations between individualism, idealism, and evolution. However, the volume was published more than a decade before the first recorded use of the phrase “Kantian individualism,” and this chronological mismatch is suggestive of a wider problem in research on Kendall: the scarcity of biographical information about her means that it is difficult to ascertain the history and extent of her knowledge of idealist philosophy and evolutionary theory. The problem is exemplified in the

fact that, whereas *Dreams to Sell* was published in 1887, Kendall did not study ethics with Ritchie until 1888. There is no evidence to indicate exactly when or how Kendall started her education in philosophy and science, but it is certain that her Oxford studies constituted an extension, rather than the foundation, of her knowledge of idealism. *Dreams to Sell* therefore offers support for LeeAnne Richardson's suggestion that, because women's poetry in the late nineteenth century frequently addresses issues which are distinct from the concerns of much Victorian writing, scholars of this poetry should "look forward—without embracing a teleological view—as well as backward." This approach "alerts us to some of the ways late-century women poets were vitally involved in poetic innovation, in producing new themes and topics, in political changes."¹² Despite Richardson's disclaimer, there is an element of teleology in her suggested method, and this is another reason for its relevance to the study of Kendall's writing. In asking whether and how Kendall's poetry prefigures later debates about the politics and ethics of British idealism, critics can be guided by the negotiation between advocacy and skepticism that characterizes her assessment of progressivist teleology.

Kendall's work as a whole presents three contrasting interpretations of idealism. Her satirical novel "*That Very Mab*," which she co-wrote in 1885 with the anthropologist and folklorist Andrew Lang, is relentless in its attacks on abstract speculation, on abstruse jargon, and on personal idealism's tendency towards solipsism. Her prose essays of the 1890s, written after she had finished her studies at Oxford, endorse absolute idealism's rejection of individualism and align it with the Christian faith in which she was raised. These essays indicate that her work with Ritchie and Wallace enhanced her sympathy for the philosophy. The comic verse of *Dreams to Sell*, in contrast, offers a more measured view. At times, Kendall's "Science" poems join the writings of the idealists in imagining an inexorable advance from individualism to social solidarity. But they are also dubious of the teleological model of history on which this belief is founded, and they voice a concern about absolute

idealism's disregard for individual differences. This skeptical and liberal position is not found elsewhere in Kendall's writing, and it suggests that she saw the standard devices of comic verse—metrical regularity, self-aware rhymes, and irony—as uniquely suited to the interrogation of the synthetic progressivism that characterized British idealist philosophy.

Ritchie's 1893 book *Darwin and Hegel* exemplifies the idealist position that Darwinian evolution was (in the words of David Boucher) “completely compatible with idealism because idealism was itself an evolutionary philosophy.”¹³ Ritchie comments in his preface that his aim is “to reconcile a qualified acceptance of the general principles of that idealist philosophy which is based on Kantian criticism (but which, at the same time, carries us back to Plato and Aristotle) with a full recognition of the revolutionary change in our intellectual universe which is due to the historical method of studying ideas and institutions, and, in particular, to the influence of the biological theory of natural selection.”¹⁴ Although Ritchie here identifies Kant, Aristotle, and Plato as the sources of British idealism, in his book's title essay it is the Hegelian dialectic which constitutes the foundational connection between idealism and Darwinism. Both “the history of philosophy” and the history of “human evolution” more generally, Ritchie argues, are characterized by a ““dialectic movement”” in which “progress does not go in a straight line; but, just because thought enters into the process, at each step there is an attempt to correct the one-sidedness of the preceding stage.”¹⁵ Ritchie presents biological, social, and philosophical history as analogous manifestations of a universal process of evolution that has shaped “ideas and institutions” as well as organisms. His integration of Darwinism with idealism enacts the way in which the “one-sidedness” of any stage of this process is corrected by the emergence of its antithesis.

The idealists' correction of Darwinism primarily consists in their claim that “the true nature of a thing is to be found not in its origin but in its end.”¹⁶ Ritchie's work in particular illustrates Devin Griffiths' recent argument that natural selection can be interpreted as “a soft

teleology,” because, although Darwinians such as Thomas Henry Huxley classified evolutionary variations as “the fruit of chance events,” Darwin’s theory “in fact *required* thinking about purpose: in order to imagine the natural history of a given adaptation, one had to guess what that adaptation does, and then explain how that purpose might have developed through gradual changes in specific behaviors or structures.”¹⁷ Reversing Darwin’s rhetorical focus on origins, Ritchie argues that evolution is a teleological process because the survival or otherwise of variant forms—biological, social, or intellectual—depends on whether or not they are useful; therefore, he contends, “the explanation of structures, habits, etc., must be found in the end or purpose that they serve.” But he insists that what he terms the “conception of Final Causes, which the theory of Natural Selection restores, is not the cruder form of teleology which attempts to explain everything in the universe by showing that it serves the good of man.” Evolution does not tend towards the good of “individuals,” or of “the species of human beings,” but of the universe as a whole.¹⁸ This position shares its emphasis on the partial perspective of human thought with Kendall’s satire of anthropocentric evolutionism in the “Lay of the Trilobite.”

Ritchie’s combination of skepticism and epistemological ambition, highlighting the limitations of human knowledge while simultaneously championing the universal scope of idealism, is also evident in the work of Kendall’s other Oxford teacher, William Wallace. In the “Prolegomena” to his 1874 translation of the essay on logic in Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Wallace asserts that “it is reason,—the Idea,—or, to give it an inadequate and abstract name, Natural Selection—which has created the several forms of the animal and vegetable world: it is reason, again, which in the struggle for existence contradicts the very inadequacies which it has brought into being: and it is reason, finally, which affirms both these actions,—the hereditary descent, and the adaptation—in the provisionally permanent and adequate forms which result from the struggle.”¹⁹ The process of natural

selection, Wallace suggests, is provisional and unending, a view of evolution that again supports Kendall's critique of anthropocentrism. And the process is directed by a reciprocal exchange between the contradictory dynamics of "hereditary descent" and "adaptation." Edmund Neill traces the same argument in Ritchie's work, observing that Ritchie "aimed to harmonise Hegelian and Darwinian procedures by arguing that natural selection could be used to explain" Hegelian teleology "by setting the processes of inheritance and spontaneous variation in a dialectical relationship."²⁰

For Wallace, human knowledge of the universal "Idea" that underpins this evolutionary dialectic is also provisional: "the Absolute—this term, which is to some so offensive and to others so precious—always presents itself to us as a Relative." Wallace tries here to pre-empt criticisms of idealism's totalizing invocation of an abstract "Absolute" by conceding the inherent relativism of philosophical knowledge. In the same sentence, though, he claims that it is possible to transcend this relativism and to progress to a recognition of the universal: "when we have, so to speak, seen the Absolute Relativity of Relation, there is very little more needed in order to apprehend the Absolute pure and entire."²¹

One of those who found the jargon of idealism "offensive" was Andrew Lang, who studied at Balliol College at the same time as Wallace. Lang was not a convert to T. H. Green's idealism. Green's popularity with students, Lang wrote in 1905, was founded on his

knack of translating St. John and Aristotle alike into a terminology which we then believed to be Hegelian. Hegel we knew, not in the original German, but in lectures and in translations. Reasoning from these inadequate premises, it seemed to me that Hegel had invented evolution before Mr. Darwin, that his system showed, so to speak, the spirit at work in evolution, the something within the wheels. But this was only a

personal impression made on a mind which knew Darwin, and physical speculations in general, merely in the vague popular way.

Lang “never believed that ‘the Absolute,’ as the *Oxford Spectator* said, had really been ‘got into a corner.’ The Absolute has too often been apparently cornered, too often has escaped from that situation.”²² Kendall collaborated with Lang throughout the 1880s and 90s; their 1885 novel “*That Very Mab*” uses the Shakespearean fairy Queen Mab as the vehicle of a sustained attack on the intellectual pretensions of Victorian culture. Much of the book’s comedy is aimed at scientific positivism and utilitarianism, but it also lampoons idealist theories that claim to align themselves with the natural sciences. The owl who acts as Mab’s guide on her return to Victorian Britain tells her that “now the philosophers are borrowing an eye of Faith from the theologians, and adding it on to their own microscope like another lens, and they have detected a kind of Absolute, a sort of a Something, the Higher Pantheism. I could never tell you all about it.”²³ The owl’s vague description of “a kind of Absolute, a sort of a Something” is an effective pastiche of the prose style of writers such as Wallace (“the Absolute Relativity of Relation”). His baffled attempt at a summary satirizes the British idealists’ analogical linking of natural and spiritual processes, and it suggests that idealism’s position as a middle ground between science and theology is intellectually untenable.

Lang’s criticisms of the idealists’ synthesis of scientific and philosophical knowledge were founded on direct contact with the theories of British idealism, and it seems likely that Kendall’s early knowledge of the philosophy was informed, in part, by her collaboration with him. Their satire in “*That Very Mab*” is comprehensive: as well mocking the jargon of the absolute idealists, it also targets personal idealism. At the end of the novel, Queen Mab abandons Victorian Britain in despair, and the owl, with nothing better to do, starts “a course

of psychological research that, it is to be feared, if persisted in, will seriously injure his brain.”

For he said, only yesterday, that as he was conscious of external objects merely through the medium of his own ego, how was he to know whether or not his own ego was the sole ego in the universe—in fact, composed the universe? He wished to be informed whether he could possibly be nothing but an impression or [*sic*] somebody else’s ego; and said finally, in a despondent tone, that it was hopeless to regard this mundane scheme as anything but a subjective phenomenon, mere *Schein* or *maya*, and that he gave it up.²⁴

These sentences voice a concern that idealism’s prioritizing of thought at the expense of “external objects” might promote a solipsistic belief that the individual mind “composed the universe.” And this ontological and ethical criticism is connected to a historical argument. Building on Lang’s interest in comparative anthropology, the novel posits an equivalence between the Sanskrit word “*maya*,” used in Hinduism and Buddhism to denote (as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it) “the illusion or appearance of the phenomenal world,” and the term “*Schein*,” which is employed by Kant and Hegel to refer to phenomenal objects, and which Wallace translates as “mere show or seeming.”²⁵ Supritha Rajan has argued that Lang’s anthropological writings highlight “the uneven segregation of magic from modern scientific rationalism and capitalist self-interest,” thereby critiquing rationalism and utilitarianism as versions of magical thinking.²⁶ In “*That Very Mab*” Lang and Kendall put forward a similar claim about Victorian idealism, which, they imply, is not an advance in the dialectical progress of knowledge, but a reiteration of a flawed subjectivist theory that has surfaced in more than one historical and cultural context.

This is not, however, a legitimate characterization of the absolute idealism of Ritchie and Wallace, both of whom insist that the essential unity of existence discredits individualism in metaphysics, ethics, and politics. For Wallace, “the only source from which moral actions can flow, as effects from cause, is a sense of solidarity with humanity, a perception that we are not our own individual selves, but that we share in an ampler life.”²⁷ And progress, according to Ritchie in his 1889 *Darwinism and Politics*, involves a recognition that personal and social development are inseparable. He asserts that the Hegelian dialectic “is the way we have to think about everything,” and then asks: “and if we apply this dialectic method to society, what does it suggest? That we cannot rest in the critical or negative stage of modern individualism.” This model of progress “implies an advance to a stage in which all that is most precious in individualism must be retained along with the stability of social condition which individualism has destroyed. And this new stage can be best described by the word ‘Socialism.’”²⁸ This argument indicates that Ritchie agrees with Kendall, who, in their tutorials together the year before, saw both “good” and “evil” in individualist ethics. But elsewhere in *Darwinism and Politics* he quotes Kendall’s poetry in support of an unequivocal attack on individualism, and on those who claim that Darwinian theory legitimizes *laissez-faire* models of sociology and economics:

“We dined, as a rule, on each other.

What matter? the toughest survived.”

This is a sufficient morality in the mesozoic epoch for the ichthyosaurus, to whom the sentiment is ascribed by the poet; and it is a convenient morality for some human animals in London to-day. Admirable, doubtless—this scheme of salvation for the elect by the damnation of the vast majority.²⁹

Kendall's "Ballad of the Ichthyosaurus" epitomizes the pervasive irony of her "Science" poems, as its speaker deplores its underdeveloped brain in terms that celebrate human intellect while at the same time mocking teleological interpretations of evolution: "A loftier goal is before us, / For higher endowments we sigh."³⁰ Ritchie, though, disregards the poem's irony and takes the dinosaur's words seriously, using them to illustrate his argument that the competitive struggle of natural selection is not in itself a sufficient explanation of the processes of social evolution. In his 1893 preface to *Darwin and Hegel*, he claims instead that his "Idealist Evolutionism" represents "the best starting point for an examination of the concrete problems of ethics and politics," because it identifies biological evolution as a subordinate element in the universal process that also directs the development of ethical and social beliefs.³¹

The critique of individualism that Ritchie puts forward in his essay on Darwin and Hegel is aimed primarily at Herbert Spencer, whose progressivist model of evolution and emphasis on the competitive "survival of the fittest" were arguably more influential than Darwin's work in shaping Victorian understandings of biological and social evolution.³² Ritchie rejects Spencer's view that "the movement of human progress is all in one direction." "Any attempts to get rid of some of the anarchy of individualism he can only interpret as a return to militancy. A follower of Hegel would agree with the average man that it is no such thing." In using socialist policies to mitigate the excesses of individualism, Ritchie insists, society will not be regressing or degenerating but "advancing to a new stage which shall reconcile both elements."³³ But his preference for one pole of this dialectic ahead of the other is evident throughout this essay:

the abstract individual—the favourite *idolon* of popular philosophy—is destroyed by the logic of Idealism, whether in the region of Metaphysics or of Ethics. Of course

each of us, if we had been making the universe, might have made his own individual self the centre of it; but logic teaches us that we cannot think the universe rightly from our individual point of view, and life teaches us that we must not live it from our individual point of view.³⁴

For Ritchie, the metaphysics of absolute idealism offers a reliable map to the “region” of social ethics. Just as the process of biological evolution is directed by a universal idea of dialectical progress, the development of the individual is inseparable from a social idea of solidarity with others. Both in theory and in practice, the limited perspective of the “individual point of view” is nugatory unless it is incorporated within a collectivist understanding of society and of the universe. Progress, therefore, is dependent on the destruction of the “abstract individual” of Spencer’s “popular philosophy.”

In the decade or so after she finished her studies at Oxford, Kendall published a series of short essays in Methodist periodicals which champion the idealist claim that evolution moves inexorably away from individualism and towards solidarity. It seems that her work with Ritchie prompted her to examine how absolute idealism might be compatible with the ethics and beliefs of Christianity, and the Christian-idealist position that she develops in these essays intervenes in some of the most prominent intellectual debates in late-Victorian Britain: it is at the same time an epistemological critique of scientific materialism; an ethical response to Darwinism; a defence of spirituality; and a blueprint for social reform, which Kendall developed further in the social research to which she devoted much of her time in the years after 1900.³⁵ In “The Social Ideal,” printed in *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* in 1894, Kendall joins Ritchie in attacking Spencer’s confidence in *laissez-faire* individualism as the basis of social ethics, but she does so in terms that highlight the similarities between Spencer’s evolutionary progressivism and Ritchie’s teleological idealism: “Somewhere Mr.

Spencer seems to think that one day the biddings of egoism and altruism will coincide,” she writes, “but that day, at all events, is too far remote to need consideration.” The essay questions the idealist conviction that the dialectical progress of history leads inexorably to the synthesis of opposing tendencies, and it also refutes Ritchie’s political optimism, as Kendall insists that “from no earthly republic or democracy can we expect universal happiness.”³⁶ The best guide to moral progress, she suggests here, is not idealism but Christian faith.

For the most part, though, Kendall’s prose writings are sympathetic to idealism, presenting the philosophy as supportive of, rather than opposed to, Christianity. The rebuttal of individualism that Kendall sets out in “The Fear of Death” (1895) commences with a discussion of scientific materialism, in which she dismisses any understanding of “the world as a system of atoms separable from mind altogether.” “It would be less misleading,” she avers, “to say that molecules were an arrangement of the soul—a form of consciousness, if we like that better.”³⁷ Although Kendall rejects materialism, her argument here is not a conventional statement of Christian dualism. Instead she claims, in agreement with Wallace and Ritchie, that the material and the ideal are reconcilable facets of an underlying unity.

This universal monism undermines the notion of a discrete self: Kendall asserts that “the soul is not, as we are all too apt to assume at times, a thing shut up in a box by itself and labelled with the name of its owner.” “Rather, a man’s soul,” she suggests, is “so much of the thought and will of the universe as somehow both *is* the man and is in his keeping, for good or evil, for which he can never shake off the sense of responsibility—a converging and diverging point of influences, where these are altered for better or worse.” Although she emphasizes the reality of personal responsibility, she concludes that the moral orientation of this responsibility is collective rather than individual: “we must save our souls, not because they are ours, but because they are nothing of the kind.”³⁸ In his analysis of her essays, John Holmes notes that “Kendall’s ethical position is grounded in her own Christianity, but it does

not require any specific theology, or even any theology at all, to sustain it.”³⁹ This is because Kendall’s position is both Christian and idealist. Modified by the ethics of idealism, Christianity is presented in “The Fear of Death” as a moral rather than a theological system, in which the individual soul is defined by the influences of, and its influence on, the souls of other people.

“A Plea for Asceticism,” published in *The London Quarterly Review* in 1900, addresses a subject which Kendall had discussed in her tutorials with Ritchie: “Asceticism is not suicide, though ill balanced asceticism may look a good deal like it. And yet it involves a death, the death of the particular, as opposed to the universal self, whose will is one with the divine will.”⁴⁰ The self-sacrifice of personal desires in an attempt to approach the divine will is the basic premise of Christian asceticism, but Kendall’s reference to “the universal self” connects it to the British idealists’ critique of individualism and their belief in the essential unity of existence. Like Wallace and Ritchie, Kendall in this essay identifies moral progress and biological evolution as analogous forms of development: “It is the lesson of evolution itself—this constant surrender of the lower to the higher type. Progress means differentiation,—self-denial. The crimson petals of the rose, botanists tell us, are simply leaves thwarted, balked of their old development, crushed into this strange splendour. Think of a human being instead of a plant, and you have the argument for asceticism.”⁴¹ In an ethical argument that is simultaneously evolutionary, idealist, and Christian, Kendall claims that, in the same way as the thwarted development of leaves results in the emergence of the more complex and beautiful structure of the rose, the “self-denial” of asceticism enables a “surrender of the lower to the higher type,” a step in the soul’s progress towards the goals of social solidarity and the universal self.

The poems on science in *Dreams to Sell* simultaneously promote and interrogate this kind of evolutionary teleology. They put forward teleological arguments, but they also use

the formal and linguistic resources of comic verse to stage a skeptical examination of those arguments which is subtler than the broad mockery of “*That Very Mab*,” and which is in striking contrast to the earnest moralism of Kendall’s essays. The poems’ scientific reference-points are not restricted to evolution: “A Pure Hypothesis” builds on late-Victorian discussions of four-dimensional geometry. The poem is subtitled “*A Lover, in Four-dimensional space, describes a Dream,*” an “awful dream / Of *Three-dimensioned Space*.”

I would not, if I could, recall
 The horror of those novel heavens,
 Where Present, Past, and Future all
 Appeared at sixes and at sevens,
 Where Capital and Labour fought,
 And, in the nightmare of the mind,
 No contradictories were thought
 As truthfully combined!⁴²

In contrast to our three-dimensional world, the speaker implies, four-dimensional reality is organized through a version of the Hegelian dialectic, in which “contradictories” such as “Capital and Labour” are “truthfully combined” in the teleological unfolding of time. The stanza illustrates the interpretative problems involved in reading Kendall’s comic verse. The speaker is horrified by their three-dimensional nightmare, and it is possible to argue that the poem asks its readers to acknowledge the social problems that elicit this horror, to welcome the possibility of a kind of progress that will resolve Victorian Britain’s class conflicts, and, as Wolfgang Funk puts it, to recognize “that the ability to imagine higher dimensional space represents a measure of evolutionary progress.”⁴³ But the speaker’s heightened language and

the stanza's formal regularity result in a tone of exaggeration which in turn invites an ironic and skeptical reading, and it is also possible to interpret the poem as a satire on those Victorian writers who used four-dimensional geometry to speculate about higher forms of consciousness and social organization.

Rhyme is of particular importance to Kendall's poetic assessments of teleology, and Gillian Beer's work on the satirical capacities of rhyme helps to explain this link. Beer notes in her essay on "Rhyming as Comedy" that "rhyme is always retrospective." The completion of rhyme depends on a comparison between the sound of a line of verse and the sound of a preceding line or lines; in a way that is structurally similar to the British idealists' evolutionary dialectic, it can be understood as an expression of the relation between the start and the finish of a series, between an origin and an end. But Beer also points out that the comedy of rhyme is founded on a "kinship" between words that is "illegitimate according to the rationale of semantics:" the development of a rhyme scheme is not logical or progressive, and "rhyme-words couple but resist collapsing into each other."⁴⁴ The perfect rhyme of "fought" and "thought" in "A Pure Hypothesis" embodies the ideal resolution of social disputes that the speaker describes, but it also highlights, in its juxtaposition of the two words, the distinction between social arrangements and philosophical theories which Ritchie's political idealism tries to collapse. Through rhyme, Kendall's comic verse both enacts and resists the dialectical synthesis of idealist teleology.

The poems in *Dreams to Sell* also utilize a duality which is identifiable in meter. Devin Griffiths has made a persuasive case for understanding meter in evolutionary terms, defining it as "an evolving system, an environment of rhythmic noise that offers fertile ground for seeded patterns of reorganization and rhythmic departure."⁴⁵ In other words, it unfolds through a process of punctuated equilibrium, in which the recapitulation of patterns and structures is interrupted by variations which transform those structures. This dialectical

exchange between uniformity and adaptation suggests that meter might be an apt vehicle for articulating the evolutionary teleology of the British idealists, but Kendall's satirical poems are characterized by a metrical regularity that typically eschews obvious and purposive variation. In this they are representative of "the overwhelming majority of Victorian comic verse," which, as James Williams notes, "is written with a prominent metrical beat" that "makes us hear metre as something at odds with feeling, an anarchic energy working against sincerity and seriousness."⁴⁶ The meter of Kendall's poetry, in this reading, is not imitative of its speakers' arguments; instead it constitutes an alternative system of implication, contrasting with and countering those arguments. The tension between these two interpretations of meter can be seen especially in polysyllabic words such as "contradictories" in "A Pure Hypothesis." In the rhythms of speech this word contains just a single stressed syllable, and when read in this way it represents a disruption to the poem's regular meter, expressive of the conflict it describes. But when read in a way that maintains the poem's regular beat, the sound of the word becomes distorted, and this distortion, enforced by the relentlessness of the meter, emphasizes and satirizes the inexorable march of progress imagined within the poem.

This sort of teleological progress is linked directly to evolution in "Woman's Future," the final poem in the "Science" section of *Dreams to Sell*. Dismissing the prejudice that women's "intellects" are "bound by a limit decisive," the poem's speaker retorts:

We heed not the falsehood, the base innuendo,

The laws of the universe, these are our friends.

Our talents shall rise in a mighty crescendo,

We trust Evolution to make us amends!⁴⁷

The consecutive stresses of “we heed not,” upsetting the poem’s iambic and anapaestic meter, are exactly the sort of generative variation that might give poetic voice to the social reforms posited in Ritchie’s idealist evolutionism. As Marion Thain has pointed out, evolutionary theory was an important rhetorical prop for *fin-de-siècle* women poets who argued for the inevitability of gender equality.⁴⁸ The progressivism of Kendall’s poem is reiterated in its final lines, as its speaker assures women readers that, in the future, “the knowledge of Newton will beam from your faces, / The soul of a Spencer will shine in your eyes.”⁴⁹ The poem illustrates, to some extent, LeeAnne Richardson’s contention that “representations of progress in late-century women’s poetry are very often gendered and very often clothed in the language of science. Science in these poems is allied with experiments with prosody as well as imagining new forms specifically adapted to new political realities.”⁵⁰ But, however radical its political position, “Woman’s Future” is not an experiment in poetic form. On the contrary, it is shaped by the use of an established formal device—polysyllabic, unstressed rhyme—that is conventionally indicative of comedy. Kendall’s comic poems follow the example of the Victorian dramatic monologue in maintaining an ironic distance between speaker and poet, and it is likely that the obtrusive rhyme of “innuendo” and “crescendo” is designed, in part, to mock the argument which it expresses. And, considering Kendall’s criticisms of evolutionary progressivism elsewhere, it is hard not to hear some bathos in the poem’s clinching identification of Herbert Spencer as the end-point of women’s evolution.

Kendall consistently uses her comic verse to interrogate the facile optimism which assumes that human beliefs and institutions are expressions of the universe’s teleological evolution. “Woman’s Future” shows that she was prepared to poke fun at examples of social progress in which she was personally invested, such as women’s education. She reserves her most direct satire, however, for cases in which notions of progress are used to legitimize

political injustice. In lines which immediately follow the discussion of Kant and Hegel in the “Lay of the Trilobite,” the fossil says to the human:

“The native of an alien land
 You call a man and brother,
 And greet with hymn-book in one hand
 And pistol in the other!”⁵¹

Ritchie argues in *Darwinism and Politics* that idealism’s collectivist view of ethics justifies “thoroughgoing” state intervention to address social inequality, and that “even a partial State-action may be gladly accepted, as a recognition that the State has duties towards its weaker members.”⁵² But in critiquing imperialism and racism, issues that Ritchie neglects to discuss, this stanza highlights the way in which evolutionary teleology (in conjunction with religious hypocrisy and Victorian exceptionalism) can help to legitimize a kind of “state-action” that depends on violence and subjugation.

The most sustained commentary on the social and political aspects of idealism in *Dreams to Sell* is set out in “Nirvana,” a poem which does not directly consider any scientific theories, but which earns its place in the group of poems on “Science” through its critique of a teleological perspective that is analogous to (and, for Kendall and the British idealists, closely connected with) evolutionary progressivism. The poem employs a comparative stance similar to that of “*That Very Mab*,” aligning the idealist “Absolute” with “nirvana,” a term which, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, refers in Buddhism to “the realization of the non-existence of self, leading to cessation of all entanglement and attachment in life.”

Some hold, life’s transitory pain

Arises from our being factions:
 When we to Unity attain,
 Behold the end of fret and factions!

They say each individual soul
 Will in a general Soul be blended,
 And that the universal whole
 Is certain to be something splendid.⁵³

In its linking of idealist philosophy with Asian religion, the poem presages twentieth-century orientalist descriptions of absolute idealism: in 1903, for example, *The Daily News* opined that “Hegel’s philosophy, like that of all great religions, is of the East; a reaction from the Kantian individualism,” an “Eastern subordination of the Self to the All.”⁵⁴ In the writings of Wallace and Ritchie, and in Kendall’s essays, the surrender of individualism is seen as an elevation rather than a subordination. “Nirvana,” however, holds this teleological view at arm’s length, both through its attribution of the argument to others (“they say”), and through the repetitive pattern of its metrical beat, which checks the supposedly inexorable progress traced in the second stanza by imposing a rhythmic uniformity on the antagonistic phrases “individual soul” and “universal whole.” The poem’s satire also works at the levels of typography and rhyme. Its use of capitalization, particularly in the transition from the “individual soul” to the “general Soul,” parodies the hypostasized abstractions that abound in idealist philosophy, and its unstressed rhymes undercut its invocation of a “Unity” that is described, with vacuous incongruity, as “splendid.”

As an example of “fret and factions,” the poem’s next stanzas cite a dispute, about whether it was possible to reconcile the narrative of the creation in Genesis with the evidence

of the fossil record, which took place between William Gladstone and Thomas Henry Huxley in the pages of *The Nineteenth Century* in late 1885 and early 1886:

Then enmity will pale and pall:

We shall be brothers, more than brothers;

For if we are ourselves at all

We shall be also all the others—

One fancies Huxley might display

A faint concern, as wondering whether

He'd time to have a parting fray

With Gladstone, ere they rushed together—⁵⁵

Huxley's rushing together with Gladstone here literalizes and therefore parodies the idealist conviction that antagonistic perspectives can and will be merged in a dialectical synthesis. And Kendall's repetitions of words manage at the same time to represent this synthesis and to ridicule its totalizing abstraction. The word "all," used both in its adjectival sense to denote an entirety and in the conditional phrase "if at all," opposes and countermands itself; and the repetition of "brothers" echoes the "Lay of the Trilobite," as Kendall again questions the teleological assumption that humans are inevitably progressing towards equality.

In "Nirvana," as in the theories of the British idealists, this equality is presented both in ontological and in political terms. The "universal whole" is described as

A sea of light, a gulf of bliss,

An end of individualism,

The Universal Suffrage this,

The blessed goal of Communism!⁵⁶

It is possible that Kendall's satire is directed here not at idealism itself but at her speaker's limited knowledge of the philosophy: the conflation of two distinct political goals, communism and universal suffrage, perhaps reveals an imprecise grasp of the issues in question. On the other hand, the stanza may also constitute a gloss on a duality present within Ritchie's political arguments, which are both socialist and democratic in orientation. Ritchie advocates an expansion of the suffrage among men and women, because the vote "is a stamp of full citizenship, of dignity and of responsibility. It is a distinct mark that the possessors of it can no longer be systematically ignored by governments and can no longer shirk the duty of thinking about public and common interests."⁵⁷ In other writings Kendall joins Ritchie in celebrating the advance towards the "end of individualism," but in "Nirvana" she playfully deploys rhyme, and specifically rhyme's tension between acoustic unity and semantic division, to subvert the Hegelian dialectic on which the theories of British idealism and of communism depend. To some extent the rhyming of opposed "isms" encapsulates and enacts the progress from one to the other, but the easy congruence of sound in rhyme—which here is limited to the shared suffix—also emphasizes, through contrast, the ideological opposition expressed in the bases of the two words, thereby questioning the possibility of such progress.

Gillian Beer observes that "Kendall has a shrewd eye for all forms of aggrandizement, particularly those of the self," and that she uses "the element of artful self-congratulation in achieving rhyme" to satirize (in the "Lay of the Trilobite," for example) the boastfulness of intellectual theorizing.⁵⁸ Kendall's rhymes in "Nirvana," however, imply that the selflessness of collectivism can also be a sort of self-aggrandizement, because it threatens to absorb and

silence opposing perspectives. The poem suggests that there may be more humility in individualism, and it ends with a plea to delay the inexorable advance of unity:

We love our feuds, our party views,
 Our idle heresy and schism:
 The time may come, we cannot choose
 'Twixt M. Comte and Methodism.

Let us be human, while we can
 Enjoy this strange terrestrial tangle:
 Nation with nation, man with man,
 While yet we may, oh let us wrangle!⁵⁹

The rhythms of Kendall's verse in the final stanza are unusually irregular: the trochaic inversions ("let us," the two uses of the word "nation") constitute variations which resist, rather than enact, the evolutionary dialectic of absolute idealism. In contrast to Kendall's Christian-idealist essays, "Nirvana" prioritizes the good ahead of the evil of individualism, offering a liberal defence of the diversity and relativity of personal opinion. Beer argues that the incomplete synthesis of words in rhyme means that "its accords are a form of disputation," and that therefore "rhyme lends itself to two apparently contradictory movements of mind: scepticism and faith."⁶⁰ The rhymes in "Nirvana" express a faith in disputation. The poem's celebration of controversy and debate, exemplified in the penultimate stanza in the rhyme of "schism" and "Methodism" and in the disparity between Kendall's Methodist faith and the positivism of Auguste Comte, questions the totalizing synthesis of intellectual and social differences on which idealist teleology is based.

The formal conventionality of Kendall's comic verse potentially has the effect of masking the sophistication of its interests. But it is that conventionality—specifically, the poetry's use of regular patterns of meter and rhyme to exaggerate, ironize, and subvert the arguments conveyed in its language—which enables Kendall's innovative discussion of questions about the relations between idealism, socialism, and individualism that emerged with greater prominence in Britain in the 1890s and 1900s. Kendall's poems prefigure these questions, because both are responses to the ideology of synthetic progressivism which was influential throughout British culture in the late-nineteenth century. James Paradis has suggested that Victorian satire operates through “a potent imagery of incongruent forms that juxtaposes the symbols of one worldview with those of another while making no commitment to reconciling these diverse materials. Indeed, the energies of irony and satire as a literary form are derived from their failure to resolve.”⁶¹ This assessment is particularly relevant to the end of the nineteenth century, because it indicates how satirical analysis could be used to counter the attempted synthesis of contrasting worldviews which underpinned much late-Victorian thinking, and which was exemplified, for Kendall, in the teleological Darwinism of the British idealists.

¹ May Kendall, *Dreams to Sell* (London: Longmans, Green, 1887), 7-8.

² See, for example, Fabienne Moine, *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 239-43.

³ May Kendall, “The Lay of the Trilobite,” *Punch*, 88 (24 January 1885), 41.

⁴ Both Gemma King and Katy Birch note that Kendall was a student at Oxford, but they do not discuss the relevance of her education to her writing. See King, “‘A Hapless Race’: Supernatural Social Satire in May Kendall's Poetry” (master's thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013), 2, <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/4774/>; and Birch, “May Kendall,” *Ladies*

Who Punch: Female Punch Contributors, 1859-1918,

ladieswhopunchbiogs.wordpress.com/may-kendall/.

⁵ For an overview of Kendall's life, see Gregory Tate, "Kendall, Emma Goldworth (May)," 2018, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.013.60516.

⁶ "Register: Kendall, May," 1887-89, Somerville College Library. Quoted by permission of the Principal and Fellows of Somerville College, Oxford.

⁷ Pauline Adams, *Somerville for Women: An Oxford College 1879-1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 33, 20.

⁸ Daniel Brown, *Hopkins' Idealism: Philosophy, Physics, Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 1-42.

⁹ "Reports: M. Kendall," 1887-89, Somerville College Library. Quoted by permission of the Principal and Fellows of Somerville College, Oxford.

¹⁰ Sandra M. den Otter, *British Idealism and Social Explanation: A Study in Late Victorian Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 7.

¹¹ For an example of the early twentieth-century opposition between "Kantian individualism" and "Hegelianism," see the future Labour prime minister James Ramsay MacDonald, *Socialism and Society* (London: Independent Labour Party, 1905), 99.

¹² LeeAnne M. Richardson, "Turn of the Century Women's Poetry: Skirting the Problems of Periodization," *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 13.3 (2017), 18, ncsjournal.com/issue133/richardson.htm.

¹³ David Boucher, "British Idealism and Evolution," in *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*, W. J. Mander, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 311.

¹⁴ David George Ritchie, *Darwin and Hegel with Other Philosophical Studies* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), v-vi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁶ Boucher, "British Idealism and Evolution," 312.

¹⁷ Devin Griffiths, "Teleology," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 46.3-4 (2018), 906-7; Griffiths' italics.

¹⁸ Ritchie, *Darwin and Hegel*, 61.

¹⁹ William Wallace, *The Logic of Hegel Translated from the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences with Prolegomena* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), cii.

²⁰ Edmund Neill, "Evolutionary Theory and British Idealism: the Case of David George Ritchie," *History of European Ideas*, 29.3 (2003), 322.

²¹ Wallace, *The Logic of Hegel*, cxiii.

²² Andrew Lang, *Adventures among Books* (London: Longmans, Green, 1905), 29.

²³ May Kendall and Andrew Lang, "*That Very Mab*" (London: Longmans, Green, 1885), 25-26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 214-15.

²⁵ Wallace, *The Logic of Hegel*, 180.

²⁶ Supriya Rajan, "Networking Magic: Andrew Lang and the Science of Self-Interest," *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 64 (2013), 3,

<https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ravon/2013-n64-ravon01452/1025672ar/>.

²⁷ William Wallace, *Kant* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1882), 210.

²⁸ David George Ritchie, *Darwinism and Politics* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1889), 71-72.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

³⁰ Kendall, *Dreams to Sell*, 15.

³¹ Ritchie, *Darwin and Hegel*, vii.

³² See Bernard Lightman and Bennett Zon, "Introduction," in *Evolution and Victorian Culture*, Lightman and Zon, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3-5.

³³ Ritchie, *Darwin and Hegel*, 66.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁵ For a discussion of this aspect of Kendall's life, see Diana Maltz, "Sympathy, Humor, and the Abject Poor in the Work of May Kendall," *ELT*, 50.3 (2007), 313-32.

³⁶ May Kendall, "The Social Ideal," *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, 117 (June 1894), 427.

³⁷ May Kendall, "The Fear of Death," *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, 118 (October 1895), 767.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 767; Kendall's italics.

³⁹ John Holmes, "'The Lay of the Trilobite': Rereading May Kendall," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 11 (2010), 4:2, 19.bbk.ac.uk/articles/10.16995/ntn.575/.

⁴⁰ May Kendall, "A Plea for Asceticism," *The London Quarterly Review*, 3.1 (January 1900), 124.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴² Kendall, *Dreams to Sell*, 11-12; Kendall's italics.

⁴³ Wolfgang Funk, "The Mathematics of Evolution: Dreaming about Four Dimensions with Edwin A. Abbott and May Kendall," *Critical Survey*, 27.2 (2015), 73.

⁴⁴ Gillian Beer, "Rhyming as Comedy: Body, Ghost, and Banquet," in *English Comedy*, Michael Cordner, Peter Holland, and John Kerrigan, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 181.

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- ⁴⁵ Devin Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature between the Darwins*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 64.
- ⁴⁶ James Williams, "The Jokes in the Machine: Comic Verse," in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, Matthew Bevis, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 822.
- ⁴⁷ Kendall, *Dreams to Sell*, 38.
- ⁴⁸ Marion Thain, "What Kind of a Critical Category is 'Women's Poetry'?" *Victorian Poetry*, 41.4 (2003), 579.
- ⁴⁹ Kendall, *Dreams to Sell*, 39.
- ⁵⁰ Richardson, "Turn of the Century Women's Poetry," 25.
- ⁵¹ Kendall, *Dreams to Sell*, 8.
- ⁵² Ritchie, *Darwinism and Politics*, 35-36.
- ⁵³ Kendall, *Dreams to Sell*, 26.
- ⁵⁴ C. F. G. Masterman, "A Statesman's Philosophy," *The Daily News* (4 March 1903), 8.
- ⁵⁵ Kendall, *Dreams to Sell*, 26.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ⁵⁷ Ritchie, *Darwinism and Politics*, 49.
- ⁵⁸ Gillian Beer, "Rhyming as Resurrection," in *Memory and Memorials, 1789-1914: Literary and Cultural Perspectives*, Matthew Campbell, Jacqueline M. Labbe, and Sally Shuttleworth, eds. (London: Routledge, 2000), 200.
- ⁵⁹ Kendall, *Dreams to Sell*, 27.
- ⁶⁰ Beer, "Rhyming as Comedy," 193.
- ⁶¹ James G. Paradis, "Satire and Science in Victorian Culture," in *Victorian Science in Context*, Bernard Lightman, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 148.